

# Traffic congestion: Don't wait for the magic bullet; it's stuck in traffic

**B**REAKING NEWS: The Charleston metro area is growing like crazy! Like you didn't know, right? And the growth in traffic congestion has been just as dramatic during the past few years.



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The Brookings Institution has some bad news about traffic congestion—get used to it. Here is the summary of a 2004 “Policy Brief” on the subject by Brookings Senior Fellow Anthony Downs:

*Rising traffic congestion is an inescapable condition in large and growing metropolitan areas across the world, from Los Angeles to Tokyo, from Cairo to Sao Paulo. Peak-hour traffic congestion is an inherent result of the way modern societies operate. It stems from the widespread desires of people to pursue certain goals that inevitably overload existing roads and transit systems every day. But everyone hates traffic congestion, and it keeps getting worse, in spite of attempted remedies.*

*Commuters are often frustrated by policymakers' inability to do anything about the problem, which poses a significant public policy challenge. Although governments may never be able to eliminate road congestion, there are several ways cities and states can move to curb it.*

I was particularly interested in the article's description of which remedies work and which don't when it comes to managing traffic.

## What won't work

**Charging peak-hour highway tolls.** Lowcountry citizens made it clear during the debate over funding for the new Cooper River bridge that tolls were not an option. And probably the best argument against peak-hour tolls on the area's major highways is the financial impact on those who can least afford to pay tolls. In Florida, a major turnpike parallels I-95. You can take the

Interstate, or you can pay extra for a quicker ride. But in our area, we don't have the land available for such an option.

**Greatly expanded road capacity.** The Brookings report acknowledges that roads need to be expanded and improved as a region grows but points out that new roads almost never relieve congestion over the long term. Just like water flows downhill, traffic quickly flows toward less congested roads to even out the load. And, new roads often open up new areas to development, creating a self-defeating cycle in terms of traffic volume.

**Greatly expanded public transit.** Public transit should be a part of our region's system for getting people around but not because it will solve our congestion problems. Rather, public transit can and should help low-income, disabled and elderly people who cannot get to jobs, medical appointments or otherwise enjoy mobility. It is the right thing to do to make us a better community for all our citizens.

I do see a potential opportunity for a light-rail system roughly parallel to I-26. The success of the system would depend on our success in developing a high-density “urban spine” from the Charleston peninsula up through North Charleston and beyond. The Noisette and Magnolia projects are leading examples of initiatives that can bring this vision closer to reality. If the optimal amount of high-density development does take place, a light rail system augmented by buses and trams could help, though not cure, our traffic congestion problems.

**Living with congestion.** Traffic congestion, says Brookings, is more a *solution* than a problem: The “basic mobility problem” is that “too many people want to move at the same times each day. Why? Because efficient operation of both the economy and school systems requires that people work, go to school and run errands during the same hours so they can interact with each other. That basic requirement cannot be altered without crippling our economy and society.”

## OK, so what can we do?

The Brookings report offers some ways to limit the growth of congestion.

### Rapid response to traffic accidents and

**stalled vehicles.** Some experts think half of all congestion is caused by accidents and other incidents. In some urban areas, rapid response teams cruise the major highways, ready to respond quickly and clear the roadway to resume normal traffic flow. In our area, I am sure that careless, reckless and inattentive driving causes many thousands of hours of delay every year.

In addition to rapid response teams, I would like to see signs on our major roads saying “\$500 fine for causing traffic delays,” and let magistrates fine people who caused accidents because they were reading a book, having breakfast and yakking on their cell phones while driving 80 miles per hour on I-26 in rush-hour traffic.

**Ramp-metering.** This approach uses stop lights at interstate on-ramps to control the flow, preventing traffic jams and reducing accidents. It has been used successfully in Seattle and Minnesota, and Brookings says it could be more widely used.

**Encourage high-density construction and discourage low-density sprawl.** There are many sides to the current fight over the proposed Watson Hill development, but the idea of limiting density to one house for every eight acres is a prescription for the type of far-flung sprawl now plaguing Atlanta, Phoenix and the area west of Washington, D.C. It forces developers to push farther out into the country to build affordable housing.

There may be a special case for extremely low density in Watson Hill, if the project must rely on Highway 61 as its main (or even secondary) access road, but from a regional standpoint we are deluding ourselves if we ignore the consequences of “stopping” urban growth in this manner.

As I noted above, the flip side is that we still have the opportunity to marry a light-rail transit system with high-density mixed-used development between the Charleston peninsula and North Charleston. It is a huge opportunity, but it will require more intelligent thought, discussion and regional collaboration between the private and public sector than we have seen to date.

Don't wait for the magic bullet; it's stuck in traffic. Let's get smart and work together on this daunting challenge. ■